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ABSTRACT

This report reviews efforts to reform urban schools, focusing on initiatives in Tennessee and California as examples from which distric leaders may draw useful lessons. The report suggests that comprehensive school reform (CSR) offers promise to struggling urban schools by focusing on transforming the academic climate, school culture, and curriculum to meet the particular needs of students and teachers. Schools most likely to engage in CSR are those that need radical reform (i.e., high poverty schools facing incoherent organization, poor leadership, ill-qualified teachers, racial tension, conflicting reform efforts, and limited resources). The report examines the attempts and failures of piecemeal reform (e.g., class size reduction), then goes on to discuss CSR as an integrated approach to urban school reform. Four aspects of urban school reform that can either foster success of CSR or derail it are: the school's vision and reform plan, the school's community capacity, support from the school community, and aligned policies and priorities. The paper concludes that schools and districts should be encouraged to complete a thorough needs assessment to determine their own strengths and weaknesses and to find the strategy that best fits their needs, culture, and climate. CSR offers the chance to make positive curricular, academic, discipline, and policy changes with the most potential to improve students' chances of success. (Contains 18 references.) (SM)

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CSR Connection

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Closing the Achievement Gap: Urban Schools

By Kathleen Porter and Stephanie Soper

Conventional wisdom maintains that American public schools are in crisis—they are not adequately preparing our youth to be successful and economically productive in the future. In reality, the problem is primarily concentrated in urban schools that often serve a majority of students who are low-income and minority.

Researchers have documented the urban-suburban disparities between quality of teaching, income and education of families, engagement levels of students, and the physical condition of the schools themselves. These conditions contribute to a large and growing achievement gap between low-income and minority youth and their white, suburban, and affluent counterparts (Education Trust, 2002). This achievement gap has far-reaching, lasting effects on the standard of living of minorities in our country, as well as the prospects of future generations of a growing minority population.

With limited resources, educating the often troubled, low-income students who attend our urban public schools is not easy. The plethora of challenges and frustrations that teachers in these schools face every day either keeps away or drives away the vast majority of our most qualified and experienced teachers and principals. For many, a transfer from an inner-city school to an affluent

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suburban district is considered a promotion. Consequently, our most disadvantaged youth are often taught by our most inexperienced, unqualified teachers, in schools led by novice principals.

Unfortunately, effectively reforming urban schools is difficult. Over the course of the past several decades, policymakers have sought and tried multiple strategies that, for a variety of reasons, have failed to close the achievement gap. Many well-intentioned urban school reform strategies have failed because they have a limited scope and a narrow purpose. Many are designed specifically to improve one subject area or to address an issue like teacher quality; few are designed to attack the multiple problems found in urban schools. In recent years, however, comprehensive school reform (CSR) has offered promise to struggling urban schools by focusing on transforming the academic climate, school culture and curriculum to meet the particular needs of their students and teachers. Not surprisingly, because of the comprehensive focus of these reform strategies, the schools most likely to engage in CSR efforts are those that need radical reform, namely high-poverty schools that face incoherent organization, poor leadership, ill-qualified teachers, racial tensions, a flotilla of conflicting reform efforts, and a disturbing lack of resources (Berends, Bodilly & Kirby, 2002, p. 174). Fortunately, because comprehensive reforms have focused to such a great extent on these high-need urban schools, the CSR movement has created a growing body of both anecdotal and research-based evidence of what hinders success of reform and, more encouragingly, what can work in these settings.

The Attempts and Failures of Piecemeal Reform

Piecemeal reforms have met with much success in well-functioning, high- or moderately high-performing schools. Schools that have already established an effective academic climate can often make small policy changes that have a profound impact on student achievement. One such example was Project STAR, a class size reduction program that reduced the teacher-pupil ratio throughout the state of Tennessee. According to research conducted by Jeremy Finn and C.M. Achilles, results from research on Project STAR "leave no doubt that small classes have an advantage over larger classes in reading and math in early primary grades" (Finn & Achilles, 1990). Well-publicized results from the study gave hope to districts desperately seeking a "silver bullet" reform that could help them reduce the achievement gap between blacks and whites.

Partially due to the success of class size reduction in Tennessee, California policymakers enacted their own voluntary class size reduction plan, which included incentives for schools to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio to 20:1. Unfortunately, as is the case with many sweeping statewide reform efforts, this class size reduction had some unintended and undesirable consequences, not the least of which was a severe shortage of qualified teachers to fill the increased need in K-3 classes. This shortage of teachers was compounded by a budget shortfall initiated by an economic downturn, which forced several districts to abandon the program, and called into question the sustainability of this reform effort.

Class size reduction failed for much the same reason that many piecemeal reform strategies fail in urban schools: Single-focus reform efforts cannot, by themselves, sufficiently change the overall culture and academic climate of our most troubled schools. As useful as smaller classes had been shown to be in Tennessee, in California they could not solve—but rather highlighted—problems of teacher qualification and severe shortages in resources. In just about every urban district throughout the country, non-systemic, piecemeal reforms such as small class size, special reading programs, school-based management, school uniforms, new discipline policies, or a new approach to bilingual education have been adopted and, in a matter of a few years,

abandoned because they failed to solve the problem of inadequate education.

Two lessons can be learned from these efforts. First, if urban education reform is to have any hope of success, district leaders must adequately research and plan not only for the initial adoption and implementation of a strategy, but also for its long-term sustainability. This means anticipating its long-term consequences and determining the kind of financial, staff and community support it will need to be sustained beyond the first few years. Second, the problems facing schools that serve our poorest and minority students are unique and complex; no one solution will meet the needs of every school in every state. California learned the hard way that the educational challenges it faced were much different than those facing Tennessee schools. Trying to impose reforms that do not match the culture and climate of a state, district or school will doom a well-intentioned reform to failure.

An Integrated Approach to Urban School Reform

Because there are so many different problems facing urban schools and districts throughout the country, there is no one "cure-all" reform that will help all schools. Comprehensive school reform offers a different kind of strategy—a strategy that demands time and commitment on the part of school faculty and staff, but one that also holds the promise of transforming underperforming urban schools into places where all students can learn.

You may ask, however, if CSR is a radical change from efforts in which states, districts, and schools have already invested millions of dollars and years of effort. In fact, CSR is both a radical shift and a familiar friend—it is both an extension of effective reform ideas already in use and a step beyond them. The key difference between what has been and what is coming to be in school reform is the addition of comprehensive and (ideally) collaborative planning. In properly implemented CSR efforts, everyone involved in a school community has mutually-held goals and a common language to describe what is happening in the school. In a word, it is planned. Everyone shares a vision. Comprehensive change becomes deliberate, not a happy accident.

A key to understanding comprehensive school reform is appreciating how it is distinct from most of the popular reform strategies that tackle one or two aspects of a school climate, culture, or curriculum. CSR is grounded in the idea that sustainable schoolwide improvement is possible only if schools effectively identify their own strengths, weaknesses, and needs, and on that basis, carefully craft a reform plan that addresses those needs. A school's comprehensive plan will likely include improving the climate and culture of the school community in addition to its academic needs. A carefully designed CSR plan offers

- a systematic approach to schoolwide improvement that incorporates every aspect of a school, from curriculum and instruction to school management;
- a program and a process designed to enable all students to meet challenging academic content and performance goals;
- a plan for using research to direct the move from multiple, fragmented educational programs to a unified plan with a single focus: academic achievement;
- incentives and direction for long-term, collaborative efforts among school staff, parents and district staff.

CSR incorporates decisions about every aspect of a school, from curriculum and instruction, professional development, and parental involvement, to assessment plans and school management. Just as important, a well-designed CSR strategy considers not only the implementation of a

school reform plan, but also the means of sustaining it over the long term.

Challenges of CSR

Several factors can either foster the success of a CSR effort in a school or derail it. This section introduces four such aspects of urban school reform—the school vision and plan; the school community's capacity; support from the school community; and aligned policies and priorities.

The School's Vision and Reform Plan

Research shows that the development of a clear vision and planning to support that vision are essential to the success of urban school reform. With a "big picture" to guide reform efforts, it is easier (if not actually easy) to stay focused on what the school has decided matters most, focus efforts on what is substantial, and not stray far from the school's goals and objectives.

Yet it is enormously difficult in the face of daily chaos that confronts urban, poor schools, to find the time to effectively plan for implementation and sustainability. Experts recommend that schools take a full year to complete a thorough needs assessment and to form a coherent vision of what the school can be (Ceperley, 2000). Struggling schools must not only identify their vision and goals, but they must anticipate all that will be needed to make the vision a reality and try to determine what problems will arise, so that they can troubleshoot in advance how they will tackle them.

It is perhaps helpful to think of urban school reform as a puzzle—not a far-fetched metaphor! In an effective comprehensive school reform effort, all the pieces are from the same puzzle. There is a single, coherent picture to guide the work, and puzzle aficionados use strategies to get the picture put together. For instance, some people put together all the edges first. They are easy to identify and, when they are put together, they form a clear framework for the rest of the puzzle. School climate might be a "frame" in CSR.

Piecemeal reform, on the other hand, is like having the pieces for several puzzles—maybe complete sets, maybe not—all in one pile. All the pieces have their own worth, but they don't necessarily fit with each other. They do not come together to form a coherent picture.

In order to determine where a school's strengths and weaknesses are, a school must collect and analyze data to see which students' needs are being met, and which are not. Identifying a school's weaknesses is never popular or easy. In "Closing the Achievement Gap: How Schools Are Making It Happen," Thomas Fowler-Finn, superintendent of the Fort Wayne, Indiana, Community Schools, describes resistance to his suggestion that the system disaggregate, by race, data on student discipline:

> People were not willing to enter the data the first year...It took us two and a half years before people entered all the data. By then, they knew we were serious, and that we would follow up on the information...We are the only district in the county that collects this much information. People say, "Look at how bad things are." Things are just as bad everywhere else, but people don't know it because they don't collect the data...There is no way to make progress on these things without dealing with the reality of where you are starting from (Rothman, 2001).

Although the needs assessment was arduous, thanks to the dedication of staff and the support of the district administration, a middle school was able to identify its gaps in achievement, and to work to make improvements. By 2000, the gaps were cut by more than half: 94 percent of white students passed the mathematics test, as did 75 percent of African Americans and

80 percent of Hispanics. Though the gap has not closed, it is much smaller (Rothman, 2001).

The North Central Regional Education Laboratory (NCREL) recommends that schools and districts continue their investigation into their needs by asking whether clearly articulated goals already exist for curriculum and instruction, professional development, parent and community involvement, and student achievement. Schools should also consider questions about budgeting, scheduling, and school-wide readiness for change. Comprehensive resources for planning and for creating a vision can be found at NCCSR's Step by Step site (http://www.goodschools.gwu.edu/sbs/index.html).

The Capacity of the School Community

As with each of the conditions outlined in this section, the capacity—the balance of strengths and weaknesses—of the school community is a "make or break" factor in the success of school reform. Almost before the reform begins, the school must evaluate its capacity for leadership, instruction, and effective change. On the surface, low levels of capacity might seem to doom urban efforts at whole-school reform. Urban schools that are successful with whole-school reform are those that address the strengths and struggles of staff, students, and parents and other local community members.

The Capacity of the Community as a Whole

As much as urban school reform requires a comprehensive effort, it also requires a cohesive community willing and able to work together on the difficult process of reform. However, learning how to collaboratively make decisions, write a new curriculum, and handle disciplinary climate issues in ways that are both effective and culturally sensitive are difficult tasks to accomplish in already chaotic learning environments.

Chaotic learning environments have their root in factors that can be difficult for schools to control: high levels of poverty, circumstances in the local community that affect morale such as crime and blight, revolving-door district administrators, distrustful relationships with district or state school department officials, distrustful relationships between teachers and the principal, and local political issues are just a few of these factors (Berends, et. al, 2002; Bodilly, 1998; Cook, Murphy, & Huni, 2000). To overcome these obstacles, school districts, such as Trenton, N.J., generate a common belief that "effective implementation requires a willingness to approach the hard work of improving urban, minority student achievement as a collaborative effort" (Lytle, 2002). Researchers speculate that "the best schools [in successful implementation of reform efforts] are those that begin with activities to improve both a school's climate and its academic focus. Indeed, the two are often not very distinct in either the staff or student view" (Cook, Murphy, & Hunt, 2000).

Capacity of Principals and Teachers

In studies of the effectiveness of implementation of CSR efforts through New American Schools, teachers viewed principal leadership as an important component of successful implementation across all of the New American Schools (NAS) studies (Berends, Bodilly, & Kirby, 2002, p. 172). For years research has confirmed such observations; moreover, recent research such as Desimone's "Making Comprehensive School Reform Work" (2002) reports that the quality of a principal's leadership remains a critical element in school improvement. Other research has taken this finding a step further, reporting that the attention paid by the principal to the various aspects of a school's improvement plan often determines the school's success (Murphy & Datnow, 2003). It is, thus, clear that principal capacity is critical to successful urban school improvement.

It is also obvious, as to hardly need saying, that the education of poor and minor-

ity students hinges on the ability of their teachers to teach them; yet, it is precisely urban and low-income students' teachers who are least likely to know their content deeply, have significant experience in the classroom, and possess a range of pedagogical skills suited their students' needs. In California, it is five times more likely that a poor student will be taught by a teacher who lacks full credentials than is the case for students from more affluent families (Rothman, 2001).

CSR Contributes to Capacity-Building

Involvement with CSR efforts can offer a means to building capacity. In some instances, schools involved with CSR contact and connect with other educators, thanks to affiliation with CSR model developers. These connections offer opportunities that districts cannot provide on their own. James Lytle, superintendent of the Trenton, NJ, Public Schools, described the effect of Trenton teachers' and principals' involvement with CSR models: "For the first time...teachers and principals are engaged in national and regional networks of practitioners with whom they share many more concerns and interests than just their experiences with the model. Their conversations with colleagues from across the country have helped them become less parochial and more open to change" (Lytle, 2002). In North Carolina, the Charlotte-Mecklenberg Public School district created curricula and instructional assistance to develop the capacity of teachers to teach these reading. Between 1995-96 and 2001-01, the proportion of African American fifth graders reading at grade level rose from 35 to 70 percent, a gain credited to these capacity-building programs for teachers (Rothman, 2001).

Support from Parents, the Community and the District

Planning and capacity-building are essential, but working to ensure community support and buy-in may make the difference between the success and failure of a reform. Without such support, racial and ethnic tensions, political pressure, and other conflicts can undermine whole-school reform (McCann, 2000; Cuban, 2001). New American Schools conducted studies of how well schools implemented reform models, which showed that schools that adopted a reform model because it was forced on them by either the principal or the district tended not to succeed with the reform (Bodilly, 1998). By contrast, public schools in Trenton, NJ, encouraged faculty and staff at low-performing schools to pick the reform model that they felt was the best fit for their school. According to results from the first three years of the study, progress has been "encouraging" (Lytle, 2002). Trenton's experience illustrates that schools and districts that have effectively used CSR to improve academic achievement have put aside personal differences and focused their energy on creative problem solving.

Support from the District

Effectively, community support for CSR is essential to sustaining a schoolwide reform plan. Often a promising CSR effort is abandoned because it did not have enough support to withstand transitions of personnel or new political leaders (Hess, 1999). Without changes at the district level that can provide sustained support -- and avoid policies that subvert reform -- changes at the school level likely cannot be sustained (Cuban, 2001).

Research has shed some light on what schools consider to be useful support from the state and district. Schools value steady and sufficient funding. In a RAND report on New American Schools, schools reported confusion and distrust over district promises to provide adequate funding for a CSR effort, and concerns that they would get deep into CSR and then "have the rug pulled out from under them" (Glennan, 1998). In these instances, the district practice is not simply ineffective; it actually deters schools from committing to CSR.

Contrasting this situation with Trenton, NJ's, it is evident that substantial funding to districts undergoing court-mandated reform can make the difference. Trenton's

per-pupil expenditures are now more than $14,000 compared to years prior. They have been given the resources they need to educate their students. The number of high school graduates has tripled and performance has increased on "many other indicators" [Lytle, 2002].

In addition, to be successful, schools need a commitment from the district to policies that will, at the very least, not be in conflict with CSR efforts. Mark Berends, Susan Bodilly, and Sheila Nataraj Kirby (2002) report that a common barrier "to implementation reported by the staffs of schools generally consisted of unsupportive district practices."

Vying with Competing Policies and Priorities

Broadly speaking, outside conditions that stand in the way of CSR fall into two categories: rules and conditions. "Rules" include legislation that sets unrealistic timelines for improvement or single-category means of defining improvement (typically test scores). It also includes union rules and district or state accountability systems that are not in alignment with CSR efforts:

- For example, in many districts, rigid salary structures based on collective bargaining reduce schools' and administrators' autonomy in the hiring, firing and rewarding of teachers. Such mandates can drastically reduce the efficacy of a schoolwide reform plan by restricting school leaders' ability to shape and affect the overall academic climate and culture of a school.

- Accountability systems provide significant incentives to enact reforms, as well as unavoidable mandates. Given the pressure they put on schools, district level accountability systems need to be in at least reasonable alignment with CSR efforts (Glennan, 1998).

- The slow process of implementation and the time lag for many CSR efforts to show significant, steady improvement in student scores imply, at least, that state and district policies should be sensitive to too-early corrective efforts (Holdzcom, 2002).

"Conditions" includes community tensions and reform overload. The past decade in education has been, if nothing else, a decade of reform. Decaying urban schools grasped any plan that offered hope for their children. At the same time, state and district departments of education, and state legislatures all contributed to reforms that schools had to enact. The result has simply been that there is too much to do, too many agendas. One Bay Area, California, middle school principal told her staff that she could not adopt the governance structure required by a whole school reform program. "I can't do it. I've got a governance structure to design for [another improvement program], a governance structure for the school, and a governance structure for the federal magnet program. I'm not going to do that. You want too much blood from us for this reform effort" (Hatch, 2001, 44 and 47).

According to Fredrick Hess, the problem with education reform "is not with the individual reforms, but with the nature of the reform enterprise itself" (Hess, 1999). Hess argues that the problem is that urban school districts are in a perpetual state of reform—that reforms are often chosen for political, rather than educational, reasons and that they are rarely given enough time to implement and evaluate before they are discarded in favor of a new strategy. This "reform enterprise," therefore, exacerbates problems in urban schools. Urban schools are plagued by high teacher turnover, instability in leadership and direction, and inadequate resources. Constantly adopting and discarding reforms before they have been adequate-

ly implemented only exacerbates this problem. It frustrates teachers who have been through a plethora of education reform programs already, and it does not help raise student achievement.

Conclusion

It is clear that education reform can not be uniformly applied to work in all urban schools throughout the country. Instead, schools and districts should be encouraged to complete a thorough needs assessment to determine their own strengths and weaknesses, and to find the strategy that best fits the needs, culture and climate of their school. Comprehensive school reform offers schools the chance to make positive curricular, academic, discipline and policy changes that have the potential to improve students' chances of success. For CSR to work for urban schools, however, these schools must do some of the most difficult work prior to implementing the reforms, and they must receive support from the community and school system in the process. CSR can be the strategy for urban schools as long as the schools work hard to ready themselves and the community prior to implementation. Preparing for reform after that point will make the work harder and may delay if not derail important improvements.

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